

KAYAKS LAUNCH A NEW FISHING CRAZE

More anglers are finding these nimble craft a ready alternative to power boats

WRITTEN BY MIKE ZLOTNICKI & PHOTOGRAPHED BY THOMAS HARVEY

Kayaks are fishing platforms that are equally effective on salt marshes (top) or freshwater reservoirs.



IT'S A FOGGY MORNING as Henry Veggian parks his vehicle at the Farrington Point Boat Ramp and prepares to launch his boat. A scant few vehicles share the lot as he eases his craft into the water. He then walks back to his car to gather his gear for a morning on the water.

What separates his launch from most boaters is that he used a cart, not a trailer, to get the boat to the water. In fact, it arrived strapped to his roof. Veggian is a kayak fisherman, a veteran angler in a growing group who find the relative solitude and intimacy of fishing inches from the surface—and sometimes in inches-deep water—preferable to the traditional fishing platforms of motorboats.

After a couple of hours of fruitless casting, Veggian returns to the car and stores his gear, humoring a non-kayaker's string of questions while securing his Wilderness Systems Tarpon 130 to its rack.

"I first heard of the new fishing kayaks in 2008 from Will Cimino, a UNC student who was president of the Carolina Fishing Club," Veggian says as he stows his gear. "My friend Joe Angelcyk then let me borrow his Jackson Coosa, and I competed in my first tournament. He won the Jackson Coosa for winning the Angler of the Year in the old Carolina Yakfish series."

Veggian, an English professor at UNC Chapel Hill, is a faculty advisor to the Carolina Fishing Club. He teaches courses in the UNC Literature Program with specialization in American Literature and in the Composition and Rhetoric Program. In another lifetime, he fronted the heavy metal band Revenant and later was a guitar technician for the band Clutch. Now, he specializes in fishing kayak tournaments. Yes, what a long, strange trip it's been. One that started in New York, and later, Italy.

Veggian, 47, grew up in New Jersey. His father and mother were Italian. She often talked about the great fishing in Italy and would send her son there for the summer, where he learned to wet a line.

"Trout, pike. They catch those big wels catfish, they are crazy," he says. "Tournament carp fishing [is a] big deal there too. So, this is going back to like the late '70s. I was like 7, 8 years old."

Turning to his well-worn kayak, Veggian talks about the attributes of his craft. "Every boat has its advantages and disadvantages," he says. "What I like about a kayak is that I can get into really shallow

water that a boat, johnboat or any boat can't get into. Now you can say, 'Oh, you could do that with a canoe,' but the stability is much better on these."

Veggian says that his kayak is not designed for standing in while fishing (but he does anyway), and several brands have models designed for standing. Veggian is an angler of opportunity (he'll fish for any species) but one of his favorites is the oft-maligned bowfin.

"They're angry, nasty, prehistoric fish," he says.

Another thing that Veggian enjoys are kayak bass fishing tournaments. Participants don't use livewells so there's no weigh-in. Anglers photograph each fish on a measuring device.

"So, how it works is you've got your privacy settings, like location settings—everything's turned on," he says. "When you take that picture for your records, the location where it was captured and your unique ID tag with your codes has to be in the picture. So, when I upload this to a website during the tournament, what'll happen is that the judge can pull up the map and see exactly where the picture was taken and then they can ascertain I'm on the correct body of water. Catch, photo and release."



Dr. Henry Veggian paddles his Wilderness Systems Tarpon 130 kayak in search of largemouth bass at Jordan Lake.



Above: A place for everything and everything in its place. A fishing kayak can accommodate rod holders, tackle storage, live bait, electronics, transport cart, signal flags, landing net and other equipment. Right: "The biggest thing with kayak fishing is that it's fun," said veteran angler Jerry Dilsaver.

"You know what the top prize was last year at the Kayak Bass Fishing National Championship? One hundred thousand dollars. I have qualified and fished in all three of the KBF national championships."

Locally, Veggian is active in the Carolina Kayak Anglers. There is also the North Carolina Kayak Fishing Association and Queen City Kayak Bass Fishing in Charlotte.

BELLS AND WHISTLES

While a kayak and paddle represent the basics of the sport, there has been significant innovation for paddlers. These include electric motors to help with propulsion, foot pedals to do the same and portable fish finders to help with water depth and bottom structure. When asked about essential gear, Veggian doesn't hesitate.

"First of all, you need a PFD [personal flotation device]," he says. "Safety first. Then a paddle. And then for me, a comfortable seat. As you get older, that's important. You know, a kayak is a low maintenance thing as a fishing platform. It's light, it's portable, it's fun. The more you put into it, the more you're gonna get out of it. The great thing about kayaks is you can customize them in a million ways."

Veggian says a typical fishing kayak is in the 10- to 13-foot range, with small models built for whitewater and longer models better suited to open water and the ocean. When asked about favorite bodies of water, Veggian rattles off places like Jordan Lake, Harris Reservoir, Lake Johnson in Raleigh, University Lake in Chapel Hill, Cane Creek Reservoir in Chapel Hill, Lake Mackintosh in Burlington (which has a section for electric motors and paddling only) and the Neuse River below Raleigh.

For aspiring kayakers, Veggian says try before you buy. "Go to the store demos," he says. "People should go and take one of those basic kayak safety and paddling classes. Also go see your doctor and make sure [you're able], because there's some physical exertion involved in the activity."

Even when fishing inland, Veggian advises to keep an eye on the forecast and don't take chances. "Don't ever go out when it's really blowing and howling," he says. "I saw some rescues out at some of the big lakes, like you know, they sent the Coast Guard to save a kid in Kentucky Lake last year because he couldn't paddle back. The wind was so strong, it slumped him and

he ended up on an island. They had to go fish him off the island."

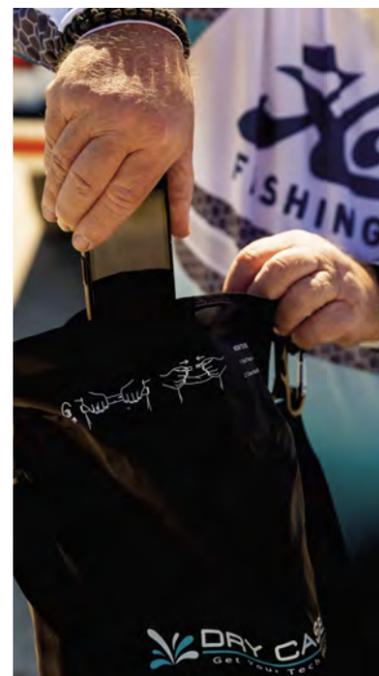
The kayak experience is worth it, Veggian says. "Catching a big fish from a kayak is like no other. I've done it from every vessel and catching them from a kayak is just the best."



THE SALTWATER SIDE

Jerry Dilsaver is a name familiar to many Tar Heel anglers, especially those who fish saltwater. The son of a commercial fisherman and a Southport native, Dilsaver has made a career of writing, conducting seminars and competing in tournaments. In fact, Dilsaver and his crew of the Carolina Adventure won a Southern Kingfish Association national championship in 2001. Fast forward to 2018 and Dilsaver has traded his dual outboards for a paddle and pedals in his Hobie kayak. Another long, strange trip for a kayak man.

"I got started kayak fishing while out getting information and pictures for a story for *North Carolina Sportsman* magazine," Dilsaver says from his home office on Oak Island. "I asked the captain who I was with, as I always do, to bring a friend so that I could take pictures of him netting for his friend or the two of them holding for a shot so it wasn't just one person in all the pictures. And the friend he brought was a kayak fisherman who after roughly half a day said something to me about 'Jerry, I bet you'd like kayak fishing.' And I said



Top: Kayaks, like this Hobie, are ideal for shallow-water angling in coastal backwaters. Clockwise: Rod holders hold rods and rods are tied to the vessel in case of a mishap. Fish finders tell the angler about water depth and bottom structure as well as possible fish below. The Micro Anchor is a battery-operated pole that helps position a kayak in place. Many Hobie kayaks feature a hands-free pedal drive for propulsion. A waterproof storage bag is a good idea for electronics, wallets and other items that should remain dry.

10 PLACES TO GO KAYAK FISHING ON THE COAST

Dilsaver is not only knowledgeable about how to kayak fish, but also where to deploy a boat. Here are a few of his favorite kayak fishing spots along the North Carolina coast, starting from the north. See page 42 for a list of Coastal Boating Access Areas. Visit ncwildlife.org/boating for an interactive Boating Access Area locator.

1. MANTEO, NAGS HEAD AREA: There is a Wildlife ramp right under Highway 64/264 and it's a great place to launch because you're in good fishing water within a half mile in both directions. This bridge is also a good place to fish. A second Wildlife ramp is on Bowser-town Road near the North Carolina Aquarium and gives quick access to the marshes on the back side of Manteo and Wanchese.

2. OUTER BANKS, WAVES TO OCRACOKE: There are no Wildlife ramps in this area, but there are pay ramps in Frisco and Hatteras. There is a municipal or park service ramp in Ocracoke and there are numerous spots beside the road to launch to fish the back side of these islands.

3. BELHAVEN TO NEW BERN: There is a Wildlife ramp in downtown Belhaven that gives you access to the Pungo River and there's some really good trout, puppy drum and striper fishing within sight both ways. There is a Wildlife ramp at Oriental that gives access to the creeks and Neuse River there. There are also several pay ramps in Pamlico County that give access to the Neuse and Pamlico rivers and many creeks.

There are municipal ramps at New Bern for access to the Neuse River and Craven County Parks and Recreation Department has kayak launches on several creeks off the river. There are Wildlife ramps at Slocum Creek and Hancock Creek around Havelock for access to these creeks and the Neuse River.

4. SWANSBORO/HUBERT AREA: There's the Shell Rock wildlife access area that gives you access to a whole lot of marsh between Hammocks Beach State Park and Browns Island. There is another small Wildlife ramp at Willis Landing and a kayak launch at Hammocks Beach State Park. These give access to the same waters.

5. TOPSAIL AREA: There is a Wildlife ramp that provides access to a lot of productive water off the Intracoastal Waterway between Wrightsville Beach and Topsail Island. There's also one where Highway 50 comes into Surf City. There are also Wildlife ramps under the North Topsail Bridge and at Turkey Creek on the mainland that give access to the bays and marsh at North Topsail.

6. WILMINGTON: Going down into Wilmington, there's Trails End ramp that provides good access to the Intracoastal Waterway behind

Masonboro Island. There are Wildlife ramps at Wrightsville Beach and Carolina Beach, but they are usually busy. There is a ramp at Carolina Beach State Park that isn't as busy, but is restricted to park hours.

7. OUTSIDE WILMINGTON: Turn up the Cape Fear River near Wilmington, one of my favorite places to fish is out of River Road Park. River Road Park is a Hanover County park that actually has a fishing dock in addition to their picnic shelters and other stuff. It's ideal for a kayak and it's at a place where the Cape Fear River is probably three-quarters of a mile wide or wider, and there are a series of spoil islands where they put what they dredge up to keep the ship channel deep enough. Fishing here is good behind the spoil islands, along the mainland bank and in several creeks that go into the mainland.

8. NEAR FORT FISHER: About 200 yards beyond the Fort Fisher side of the South Fort Fisher Ferry there is the Federal Point ramp. The Federal Point ramp launches into the bays that are off the Cape Fear River, but separated from the Cape Fear River by a rock wall that was built by the Core of Engineers in the late 1800s. So, you've got a protected area and there are three bays, the one closest to the ramp is called the Basic. It's probably a half mile or a little more across. You go to a little channel between a couple of islands and it opens into Second Bay. Second Bay is probably a mile and a half long or so and when it necks down again, you go through a couple of creeks and you come into Buzzard Bay. And those three bays hold fish all year. They are particularly good in the winter because they're shallow, have mud bottoms and any sunshine tends to warm the water up and [draw] fish out.

9. SOUTHPORT/OAK ISLAND AREA: There are a couple of places you can launch right on the Southport waterfront. There is Southport Marina, there is a Wildlife ramp between Southport and Oak Island. There are a couple of municipal ramps on Oak Island.

10. BRUNSWICK COUNTY CONTINUED: Back on the mainland, there's a Wildlife ramp at Sunset Harbor. There's a municipal ramp in Varnamtown. There is a Wildlife ramp at Holden Beach, a Wildlife ramp at Ocean Isle Beach and a Wildlife ramp at Sunset Beach. Each of these Wildlife ramps provide anglers with access to the creeks in the area and the marsh system located between the mainland and the islands.



Capt. Jerry Dilsaver pedals his way to a new spot, hands free in case he needs to grab a rod quickly.

'Wow, I'd never thought of it, but it sounds like fun.'

"I gave him a card like I do with many people who I think have good ideas and said 'Call me when you wanna go sometime.' And two weeks later he called me, it took a couple more weeks for us to get together and get out, but from that first trip on I was hooked."

Dilsaver says his first trip was an inshore foray with a "mothership" base boat easing along behind the kayakers. After catching some small speckled trout and puppy drum, he hooked into a big drum for his kayak baptism.

"The tide was following with some water running through the creek," he recalls with a laugh. "This fish just burned it out from the banks and got in that current and started dragging me down this creek in the kayak. And I bumped off a couple of oyster rocks. And the guy who was taking me was yelling at me to beach the kayak so I could stop it and beach the fish, but I was just laughing so hard initially I couldn't do it."

In ancient whaling terms, Dilsaver was on a Nantucket sleighride.

"The fish drug me probably close to a couple a hundred yards before I realized what all was going on and calmed down enough that I steered the kayak up into the grass, where it stopped, and then I could fight this fish back to me," he says. "But man, after that one time I was hooked and within,

I don't know, I would say two weeks, I had a kayak."

Like Veggian, Dilsaver says demo days on the water are key, but listen to the fishing side of it when looking. By attending a demo day, you test drive many models at once with a fresh memory. For saltwater, Dilsaver says that more storage is preferable and maybe a baitwell, as one may paddle farther and the drag of a bait bucket in the water will take its toll over a day's fishing. Dilsaver is a Hobie pro-staffer who prefers the optional pedal propulsion of the Hobie.

"Well, the thing that I laugh and make a joke about, but it really sits in with people, is that I've been doing this awhile now and I never figured out how to cast while I had a paddle in my hand," he says with a laugh. "What it does is it keeps your hands free. Regardless of whether you're in freshwater or saltwater, if you are making a move between spots you can be peddling for your propulsion and changing a lure, putting on a new leader, whatever needs to be done to be ready to fish when you get to the next spot. And you can do multiple things while you're underway as opposed to having to hold the paddle."

When planning trips, saltwater kayakers should consider tides, wind and weather in general. If possible, plan to come home with the tide and the wind. Dilsaver's mandatory equipment includes a PFD, a whistle and a single white light visible from 360 degrees.

Another ideal piece of gear Dilsaver uses, much like Veggian, is a cart to transport the craft to launch. Boonedox, based in Thomasville, makes Landing Gear and Nose Gear for specific brands and models of kayakers. Dilsaver uses a depth finder and a micro power pole that is operated remotely by a fob on a lanyard to anchor in shallow water.

"It's really amazing some of the stuff that is coming out in the kayak market and the folks that are, how hard they're working on it," he says. "For years, the sort of running joke was that kayak anglers were the most creative guys there were because we could make anything out of PVC and five-gallon buckets and stuff."

For Dilsaver, who spent years bouncing around on center-console boats off the beach, kayakers represent something else.

"You know the biggest thing with kayak fishing is that it's fun," he says. "Heck, I've had otters swim up and look at me like 'Hey dude, what's up.' I've been sitting sort of back into the edge of the marsh grass fishing a little rip and had shorebirds and some of the small, green herons just walk across the kayak. It's relaxing as well as getting your exercise. It's fun, you can choose to release the fish, you can choose to keep some for supper." ♦

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